
Research Note

T. S. Eliot's Conversion from Unitarianism to Anglo-Catholicism

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It is a tough question for literary students to consider why T.S. Eliot turned from his ancestral Unitarianism to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927.

Eliot wrote in a letter to W. Force Stead in 1927 that he wanted Stead's advice, information and his practical assistance in receiving Confirmation with the Anglican Church. He spoke his mind frankly to Stead in his letter.

. . . . I am sure you will be glad to help me. But meanwhile I rely upon you not to mention this to anyone. I do not want any publicity or notoriety – for the moment, it concerns me alone, & not the public – not even those nearest me. I *hate* spectacular 'cornerstone'.

By the way, I was born & bred in the very heart of Boston Unitarianism.¹

W. Force Stead answered politely to the letter on February 4. He reiterated the significance of baptism and communion.

. . . forgive me if I ask whether you have been baptized ? My idea of Unitarians is of austere people who abstain from baptism as well as communion. Perhaps I do them an injustice. Anyway one must be baptized before being confirmed, tho' it is not necessary that one should receive Anglican baptism. It is different with confirmation where everything depends upon the Apostolic succession.²

In reply to Stead's letter, it seemed that Eliot steadfastly maintained the possibility of a Unitarian form of baptism. As for baptism, Eliot thought back to his childhood in St. Louis.

There is a form of baptism, a ritual with water, in Unitarianism. I cannot of course swear that I was baptized! I don't remember – is a certificate needed? But my people considered that they were identical with the Unitarian church – their position in Boston

¹ Edited by Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot Volume 3* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp.403-404.

² Ibid.

Unitarianism is like that of the Borgias in the Papacy! – and I have seen younger members of the family baptized, very formally; and I have in short not the *slightest doubt* of my Baptism. By the way, Unitarians have a kind of Communion Service – once a month, also. I never communicated; my parents did, regularly; but they did not bother about me.³

Stead's reply on February 8 seemed to be significant to those who receive Anglican baptism.

'Now to be serious, it seems to me that the Unitarian baptism is the only exception to the general rule which I mentioned in my last letter, namely that any baptism whether episcopal or not is recognised as valid, for the one essential is baptism in the name of the Trinity, and that I infer could not be expected in the Unitarian Church. . . .'⁴

Whether Eliot strengthened his belief in the Trinity of Anglo-Catholicism at that time has something to do with the general mood of his poems. One might say that Eliot's poetic tone becomes religiously tinted after 1927.

If readers compare Eliot's earlier poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations* and *Poems, 1920* with his later poems, *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*, a number of differences may be noted in the way the poet composes poems.

His earlier poems, such as "Prufrock", "Preludes", and "Gerontion", deal with the theme of God's absence in the barren modern world in which humans have lost their direction. It is next to impossible to find any sense of salvation, but only the sense of despair of Eliot's contemporaries. Eliot says in "Prufrock":

I grow old . . . I grow old . . .
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.
Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk down the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
I do not think that they will sing to me.
. . . .
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us up, and we drown.

The tone of the passage sounds very pessimistic, as if he had lost the meaning of life. The poet seems to be searching for the basic universal values that all humans, despite the

³ Ibid., p.412.

⁴ Ibid., p.428.

differences in their religious beliefs, can normally rely on.

One might say that Eliot's ancestors' Unitarianism has a great influence upon his earlier poems. Eliot's grandfather's strict views of life may have influenced his belief and thought.

Peter Ackroyd explains how great William Greenleaf Eliot's influence on his family was.

The persuasive and dominant presence in the household, however, was that of his grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, who had died the year before Eliot was born. Eliot, even in old age, remembered his influence as that of one who 'rules his son and his son's sons from the grave', a Moses upon whose tablets were engraved the laws of public service. Eliot was always much possessed by the dead, and that sense of possession (or dispossession) was one which he learned early.⁵

It can be argued that Eliot's grandfather's religious belief cast a pessimistic shadow on Eliot's earlier poems. Unitarianism is an entirely different belief from the viewpoints of orthodox Christians. Ackroyd discusses the difference between the two religious sects.

Unitarianism is, in fact, from the perspective of orthodoxy, a heretical faith principally because it does not accept the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation – Christ becoming a sort of superior Emerson. It is essentially Puritanism drained of its theology, since it denies the central tenets of predestination and damnation; heaven and hell are of less account than the mundane space which we inhabit between them Unitarianism is earnest, intellectual, humanitarian, part of that high-minded 'ethical culture' which Eliot in later years distrusted and mocked.⁶

According to Ackroyd's explanation, Unitarians do not accept the basic orthodox teaching of Christ as the Incarnated Word. Unitarianism can be called a pragmatic belief system, stressing an ethical way of life which leads Unitarians toward a stage of human perfection. Eliot seems to have suffered with the Unitarian sense of moral progress throughout his childhood.

Barry Spurr agrees with Ackroyd's observation of the early Eliot's inner struggle. He discusses

. . . in the earliest period of Eliot's life, which he was later to recall as a 'struggle', 'over many years so blindly and errantly', he was dominated by his family's well-established Unitarian heritage. This is the most significant of the formative influences comprising what Eric Sigg has called his 'deep American past, extending far back in time before his birth', in opposition to which Eliot's Anglo-Catholicism was, much later, to emerge.

⁵ Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p.16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.17.

... some aspects of Calvinist theology that are central, too, to Catholic teaching – such as the doctrine of Original Sin (utterly repudiated by Unitarianism) – were at the very heart of his Anglo-Catholic faith.⁷

Spurr also asserts that Unitarianism can be called a ‘creedless rational faith’. He explains:

Unitarianism, it was quipped, had its own trinitarianism (having rejected the orthodox belief in Father, Son and Spirit as consubstantial, coeternal): affirming the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighbourhood of Boston. Eliot was to travel as far from these religious principles (which he mocked, in his own mischievous triplet, as ‘the religion of the blue sky, the grass and flowers’) as the Unitarians had removed themselves, doctrinally, from their Calvinist forbears: for them, ‘the men who wrote the Bible and the early Christians were liberals’ ...⁸

Readers may recognize that Eliot struggled with the burden of his grandfather’s Unitarianism, which symbolized Eliot’s grandfather, William’s energy, cheers, voluntary work and liberalism.⁹ Eliot recalled that his grandfather’s image of ‘the Great Man’ was something that he could never attain.¹⁰

It would appear that Eliot had been possessed by the preaching of his dead grandfather in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all –
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways ?

It is believed that Eliot composed the poem when he was studying at the Sorbonne. It is as if the young poet was being watched by his dead grandfather even after having severed himself from his Unitarian family. His often used image of a labyrinth of streets might indicate Eliot’s inner struggle to seek the words to articulate his feeling at that time.

Before Eliot’s conversion to the Anglican Church, readers find Eliot struggling against boredom and spiritual barrenness in a world without God. Eliot’s sense of boredom and despair for his contemporary world is still apparent in *The Waste Land*.

⁷ Barry Spurr, ‘Anglo-Catholic in Religion’ *T.S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2010), pp.3-4.

⁸ Ibid., p.4.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.

Eliot depicts contemporary men walking like ghosts bereft of the purpose of life. One might argue that the poet is trying to expand his personal agony into a more universal one. His personal voice represents an ailing human voice at large. Eliot had to struggle another six years to obtain a solid belief in Anglo-Catholicism.

Ackroyd says that Eliot fell to his knees in front of Michelangelo's *Pieta* when he was visiting Rome in 1926.¹¹ Ackroyd also explains how Eliot was finally converted to Anglo-Catholicism.

. . . before his formal conversion, he was undergoing regular training and attending early morning services in the Church of England. In an essay on Lancelot Andrewes, published in this year, he described the virtues of what he called the 'English Catholic Church', and indeed his confessor has recalled how Eliot saw his conversion as a return to the religion of his English ancestors He became attached to the Anglo-Catholic movement within the Church of England, precisely because he saw in it the continuation of such a tradition.¹²

G. Douglas Atkins points out that Eliot takes from Lancelot Andrewes the idea of squeezing a word until it gives birth to a full juice of meaning which they had rarely found in the past.¹³ Atkins further discusses that Eliot's poems are not made of such squeezing of individual words before 1927.¹⁴ According to Atkins, a change appears in "Journey of the Magi" (1927) and is fully developed in *Ash-Wednesday* (1930).¹⁵

The following passage is taken from *Ash-Wednesday* :

Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated
And let my cry come unto Thee.

Sensitive readers might notice that Eliot tries to 'squeeze' poetic words in the passage. Eliot's poems and prose become religiously tinted after his conversion to Anglo-

¹¹ Ackroyd, op. cit., p.159.

¹² Ibid., pp.159-160.

¹³ G. Douglas Atkins, *T. S. Eliot: The Poet as Christian* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Catholicism in 1927. Eliot concludes the poem with a silent prayer for the Blessed Mother; the Virgin's presence and influence in Eliot's spirituality is conspicuously indicated.¹⁶ Belief in the Virgin Mary constitutes an important doctrine in Anglo-Catholicism. Eliot depicted female characters negatively in his poems before 1927.

Eliot's stance toward the Church of England becomes very firm in *Four Quartets*. The following passage demonstrates his self-conviction as an Anglo-Catholic.

While the light fails
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England.

Eliot suggests that humans can be saved by the strong belief in the Incarnation, which is central to Eliot's Anglo-Catholic faith. Eliot was reaffirming an important role for the Church of England when he wrote, "Little Gidding". His strong sense of commitment to the Church of England can also be seen in the following passage.

In England, the main cultural tradition has for several centuries been Anglican. Roman Catholics in England are, of course, in a more central European tradition than are Anglicans; yet, because the main tradition of England has been Anglican, they are in another aspect more outside of the tradition than are Protestant dissenters. It is the Protestant dissent which is, in relation to Anglicanism, a congeries of sub-cultures . . .¹⁷

Eliot does not argue that the Roman Catholic Church is less important than the Church of England. Anglicanism's role is to act as the cornerstone of culture in England. Eliot further stressed the need for a Christian society despite various Christian denominations at that time.

It sounds quite natural for Eliot to say in the last passage of "Little Gidding":

And all shall be well and
All manners of things shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

If Eliot attained such an ultimate state of mind, it was only after struggling to find the meaning of life as a Christian poet. His conversion to the Church of England was a turning point in allowing him to put behind his chaotic state of mind observed in his

¹⁶ Spurr, op. cit., p.157.

¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company), pp.148-149.

earlier poems. It could be said that Anglo-Catholicism made him the most prominent literary figure of the twentieth century.

This paper is based on a reading seminar held at the 39th Annual Meeting of the T.S. Eliot society in Atlanta, Georgia, USA.